# The Opacity of Power

*How Governing Classes Maintain Control by Remaining Structurally Invisible to Those They Govern — Why the Standard Account of Information Asymmetry, That Elites Control What the Population Knows About the World, Is Correct but Incomplete; Why the Deeper Asymmetry Is That Elites Control What the Population Knows About Them — Who They Are, How They Coordinate, and How Few of Them There Are; Why Power Must First Be Located Before It Can Be Challenged, and Why It Is Built So That It Cannot Be Located; and Why the Most Important Question a Governed People Can Ask Is Also the One Made Most Costly to Ask — From the Arcana Imperii to the One-Way Mirror*

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with Claude (Anthropic)

## PREFACE

This paper publishes, in developed and grounded form, a concept the collection has long relied on internally: that the deepest advantage a governing class holds is not what it knows about the world, nor what it makes the population believe about the world, but what the population does not know about the governing class itself. The standard account of the information asymmetry that sustains domination is outward-facing — elites control what the population knows about the world. This paper argues that the deeper asymmetry faces inward: elites control what the population knows about *them* — who they are, how they coordinate, where the real decisions are made, and how few of them there are. The network sees the population. The population does not see the network. That differential visibility is not a by-product of the governing arrangement; it is its structural foundation.

The argument's spine is that power must first be *located* before it can be challenged, and that governing classes secure themselves in large part by ensuring they cannot be located. This dimension is logically prior to the three faces of power the standard literature describes — the winning of conflicts, the setting of agendas, the shaping of preferences — because each presupposes that the power in question can be found. And it is the structural source of a pattern the collection's companion studies examine from other angles: the way a made arrangement, its makers hidden and its making forgotten, comes to be mistaken for the natural order of the world. The opacity of power is the engineering of that disappearance.

The paper grounds the concept in a tradition that runs two thousand years: from the Roman doctrine of the *arcana imperii* and its early-modern systematisation, through Foucault's analysis of the panopticon and Simmel's account of invisibility as the most radical protection, to the contemporary "one-way mirror" of the surveillance economy. It keeps the collection's disciplines throughout: it holds the strongest objection — that the analysis is a conspiracy theory — at full strength, and answers it with the distinction, grounded in Popper, between an emergent structural pattern and a designed plot; it credits the genuine functions of the visible institutions it examines; and it states what would defeat its claim. Its remedy is modest and unending: not to abolish an ineradicable structure but to subject it, continuously and imperfectly, to the light that constrains it. *Tested, not revealed.*

## A NOTE ON THIS COLLABORATION

This paper, like the rest of the collection, is a collaboration between a human author and an artificial intelligence. The concept is Thomas J. Bryan's: the inward-facing information asymmetry, by which a governing class monopolises not only force, wealth, and information about the world but the map of its own network; the recognition that power must be located before it can be challenged, and is built so that it cannot be located; the architecture of hub and spokes, with its compartmentalisation running inward as well as outward; the insistence that this is a structural pattern and not a conspiracy; and the verdict that the most important question a people can ask — who actually holds power? — is also the one made most costly to ask. The articulation, the grounding of each move in the scholarship, the verification of every figure and quotation, and the prose are Claude's (Anthropic), developed in dialogue with the author and to the project's standing rules. An earlier and shorter version of this concept was written to memorialise it for use across the collection's studies; this paper rebuilds it as a standalone work and situates it within the literature on power, secrecy, and visibility to which it belongs.

## THE ARGUMENT IN ELEVEN PARTS

*The argument, in eleven parts, runs as follows.*

**PART I — THE DIMENSION HARDEST TO SEE.** That before power can win conflicts, set agendas, or shape preferences, it must first be located; the distinction between the outward-facing asymmetry, much studied, and the inward-facing one, which is deeper; and why this dimension underlies the whole collection.

**PART II — THE OLDEST SECRET.** That the opacity is the oldest art of rule: the Roman *arcana imperii* that Tacitus named, and Clapmar's early-modern category of the *simulacra* — the preservation of one constitutional appearance while another operates — the direct ancestor of the institutional façade.

**PART III — VISIBILITY IS A TRAP.** The asymmetry of visibility theorised: Foucault's panopticon, in which power is visible and unverifiable and the watched cannot see the watcher; the paper's extension from surveillance to location; and Simmel's recognition that invisibility is the most radical protection a power can have.

**PART IV — THE HUB AND THE SPOKES.** The architecture that produces the opacity: the centre that sees the whole while each participant sees only his own spoke; and why the compartmentalisation runs inward as hard as outward, because the gravest threat to a hub is the coordination of its own operatives.

**PART V — THE SAME ARCHITECTURE AT EVERY SCALE.** How the structure operates identically from the street corner to the empire; the visible figures who front a network holding no public office; and Mills's mapping of the visible middle levels that the public mistakes for the power that resides above them.

**PART VI — THE ASYMMETRY STATED PRECISELY.** The core: the network sees the population, the population does not see the network; its consequences for challenge and misattribution; the grounding of "that is just the way things are" in the sociology of the taken-for-granted; and the gap between the hidden transcript and the public one.

**PART VII — HOW THE OPACITY IS MAINTAINED.** That the opacity is actively engineered: the institutional façade that absorbs attention onto visible structures, the rotation of visible figures that simulates change, and the delegitimation of inquiry that makes the most important political question the most costly to ask.

**PART VIII — WHY THIS IS NOT CONSPIRACY THEORY.** The decisive distinction: conspiracy posits knowing plotters at a hidden centre, while the structural account posits a pattern that emerges by competitive selection; Popper's diagnosis of the conspiracy theory of society; and why the distinction determines what response could work.

**PART IX — THE SMALLNESS, AND THE MYSTIQUE OF SCALE.** How few people occupy the governing centre, and why the opacity hides it; Mosca's organised minority; and how the manufactured

appearance of vast scale converts a set of locatable human choices into an apparatus too large to challenge.

**Part X — The Opacity and the Theory of Revolution.** Why popular revolution reproduces the order it overthrows: the population removes the visible façade but cannot see the network behind it; the record of revolutions whose architecture reproduced itself; and why this is redirection, not despair.

**Part XI — Making It Visible.** The remedy: that the opacity cannot be abolished but can be degraded by transparency, pluralism, and independent inquiry; the old tradition, from Bentham and Kant, of publicity as the precondition of accountable power; the one-way mirror of the surveillance economy; and the verdict.

PART I

# THE DIMENSION HARDEST TO SEE

*The thesis of the paper, set against the standard map of power: that before power can win conflicts, set agendas, or shape preferences, it must first be located, and that governing classes secure themselves in large part by ensuring that the populations they govern cannot locate them; the distinction between the outward-facing information asymmetry, much studied, and the inward-facing one, which is deeper and less understood; and why this dimension underlies the whole collection, as the structural source of the forgetting on which durable power rests*

## I. The Question Before All the Others

The study of power has produced a serviceable map of how the few hold the many, and the map has three regions. The political scientist Steven Lukes, in an influential account, distinguished three dimensions in which power operates: the first and most visible, which decides who prevails when interests openly conflict; the second and less visible, which controls the agenda, determining which conflicts are even permitted to reach the table and which are suppressed before they arrive; and the third and least visible of all, which shapes the very preferences and perceptions of the governed, so that they acquiesce in arrangements that harm them without experiencing the arrangement as harm. This map has been enormously productive, and the collection has drawn on all three of its regions. But this paper argues that there is a region the map omits, a dimension of power that is logically prior to all three, because each of the three presupposes it. Before power can win an open conflict, it must be present to be fought; before it can set an agenda, it must occupy the room where the agenda is set; before it can shape a preference, it must reach the mind it shapes. And in every case the governed, to contest the power, must first be able to find it. The dimension the map omits is the most elementary and the most decisive: power must first be *located* before it can be challenged at all, and a power that cannot be located cannot be challenged, however clear the grievance, however large the numbers, however just the cause.

This is the dimension hardest to see, precisely because its whole function is to remain unseen, and the paper's claim is that governing classes throughout history have understood — with varying degrees of explicitness, and often very explicitly indeed — that one of their most durable advantages is that the populations they govern do not know where power actually resides. The population sees the public face of governance: the king, the president, the minister, the executive, the official whose name is in the newspaper and whose face is behind the podium. But the visible figure may be one player among many whose names the population has never heard; may hold a single piece of a decision that is actually assembled across institutions, families, firms, and informal arrangements that no

organisational chart records; may, in certain configurations, be a front, a person whose public position absorbs the scrutiny while the decisions are taken elsewhere. The population directs its energy — its votes, its protests, its anger, its hope — at the figures it can see, and the figures it can see may not be where the decisions are made. This is not a marginal imperfection in the population's knowledge. It is the central fact about its position, and the paper's argument is that it is engineered to be so.

## II. The Asymmetry That Faces Inward

The information asymmetry that sustains hierarchical power has been studied at length, but almost always in one direction. The standard account — from the analysis of propaganda to the study of the manufacture of consent — concerns what governing classes make the population know, or not know, about the *world*: which facts are circulated and which suppressed, which narrative frames the events, what the population is permitted to believe about the economy, the enemy, the necessity of the present arrangement. This outward-facing asymmetry is real, and the collection's companion studies examine it. But it is incomplete, because it leaves out the asymmetry that faces the other way — not what the governed are made to know about the world, but what they are kept from knowing about the *governors*. The deeper asymmetry is this: the governing network knows the governed population intimately — its composition, its resources, its leaders, its fault lines, its vulnerabilities, the names and addresses of those who would organise against it — while the governed population does not know the governing network at all: not its composition, not its internal structure, not its real membership, not where its decisions are actually made, and in many cases not even that it exists as a coordinated entity rather than as the impersonal weather of "the system." The network sees the population. The population does not see the network. And this differential visibility is not a by-product of the governing arrangement; it is its structural foundation.

It follows that the governing class monopolises not only the things the analysis of power usually attends to — the means of force, the channels of wealth, the flow of information about the world — but a fourth and less examined thing: the *map of its own network*. The centre sees the whole; the periphery sees almost nothing; and the gap between the two is the architecture of durable power. This paper develops that fourth monopoly as a distinct and identifiable dimension of elite advantage, and it situates the dimension within the collection's larger argument, because the opacity of power is the structural source of the forgetting that the collection's other studies anatomise. A made arrangement comes to be mistaken for the natural order of the world, the project has argued, because its making is forgotten and its makers drop out of view; and the opacity of power is precisely the engineering of that disappearance — the active and continuous work by which the hands that placed the furniture are kept out of the room the inheritor lives in. The question of who actually holds power is therefore not a marginal or a paranoid one. It is the question before all the others, the prerequisite of every form of political engagement, because without an answer to it every challenge is aimed in the dark. The remainder of this paper is an attempt to give the question the serious treatment it deserves, beginning with the recognition that it is among the oldest questions there is.

PART II

# THE OLDEST SECRET

*That the opacity of power is not a modern pathology but the oldest art of rule, recognised and theorised for two thousand years: the Roman doctrine of the arcana imperii, the secrets of empire that Tacitus named and that must by their nature be kept from the multitude; the early-modern systematisation of those secrets by the theorists of reason of state, and in particular Arnold Clapmar's category of the simulacra — the ruler's preservation of the appearance of one constitutional form while another operates beneath it — which is the direct ancestor of the institutional façade the paper will examine*

## I. Arcana Imperii

The opacity of power is sometimes treated as a modern complaint, a symptom of the bureaucratic state or the corporation or the surveillance economy; but it is among the oldest recognised arts of rule, and the rulers who practised it named it long before the analysts who would later study it. The Romans called the secrets of rule the *arcana imperii* — the hidden things of empire — and the historian Tacitus, writing under the early emperors, used the phrase to mark a category of knowledge about how power actually worked that was, by its nature, to be kept from the general population. The word *arcanus* carried the sense of something hidden, mystical, subtle, dangerous, and emphatically not to be made common; the *arcana imperii* were the real mechanisms of imperial power, the things one would need to know to understand or to challenge the regime, and they were held close precisely because their disclosure was dangerous to the regime. Tacitus recorded the most consequential of these secrets being let out in the chaotic year of the four emperors, when it was revealed, as he put it, that an emperor could be made elsewhere than at Rome — that the real source of imperial power lay not where the official story placed it but with the legions in the provinces. The revelation of that single arcanum, the true location of the power that made emperors, was itself a political earthquake, because once the population and the army understood where power actually resided, the whole structure of deference that depended on their not understanding it was open to question. The arcana imperii are the opacity of power in its earliest theorised form: the rulers' recognition that the real workings of rule must be kept hidden, because a population that understood them could act on the understanding.

The point worth drawing from the Roman case is that the opacity was understood, by those who practised it, as a deliberate and necessary art and not as an accident of poor communication. The mechanisms of rule were hidden on purpose, because their visibility was dangerous; the official account of where power lay was maintained against the real account precisely because the gap between the two was load-bearing. This is the structure the whole paper examines, present at the foundation of the Western theory of the state: a real distribution of power, known to those who hold it, and an official

account of that distribution, maintained for those who are subject to it, with the maintenance of the gap between the two understood by the rulers as among their most important tasks. The arcana imperii were not a list of particular secrets so much as a category of knowledge — the knowledge of how power actually worked — that the rulers reserved to themselves and withheld from the ruled. And the reserving and the withholding were not incidental to the rule; they were, the Roman theorists understood, part of how the rule was maintained.

## II. The Theory of the Façade

The doctrine did not stay with the Romans. It was recovered and systematised in early-modern Europe by the theorists of what they called *reason of state*, who mined Tacitus for the secrets of how power was kept, and the most rigorous of them gave the opacity of power a theoretical structure that maps with uncanny precision onto the mechanisms this paper will later examine. Arnold Clapmar, in a treatise of 1605 on the secrets of commonwealths, divided the arcana imperii into categories and defined them as the intimate and hidden reasons or counsels of those who hold sovereignty in the state — a definition that names the inward-facing asymmetry directly, locating the secret not in what the rulers know about the world but in what they know, and conceal, about themselves and their own operation. And Clapmar identified a category of the arcana that he called the *simulacra*: the techniques by which a ruler preserves the outward appearance of one constitutional form while the real form has changed beneath it — by which a regime that has in substance become an autocracy maintains the visible institutions and rituals of a republic, so that the population, attending to the preserved appearance, does not perceive the altered substance. The simulacrum is the deliberate maintenance of a visible institutional face that no longer corresponds to the actual structure of power, and Clapmar named it as a central technique of rule four hundred years ago.

This is the direct ancestor of what the paper will call the institutional façade, and recovering its pedigree matters, because it dissolves the suggestion that the analysis of opacity is a modern conspiracy theory dressed in academic language. The recognition that rulers maintain a visible constitutional appearance to absorb the population's attention while the real decisions are taken elsewhere is not a twenty-first-century suspicion; it is a category of classical political theory, named and systematised by the early-modern students of statecraft, who regarded it not as a scandal to be exposed but as a normal and expected technique of rule to be understood. The opacity of power, in other words, has a two-thousand-year theoretical pedigree, running from the arcana imperii of Tacitus through the reason-of-state theorists to the present, and the rulers who practised it understood it far more clearly than the ruled who were subject to it — which is, of course, exactly what the doctrine would predict. The paper now turns from the rulers' own theory of their opacity to the deepest modern theorisation of the asymmetry of visibility on which it rests.

PART III

# VISIBILITY IS A TRAP

*The asymmetry of visibility theorised in its purest modern form: Foucault's analysis of the panopticon, in which power is arranged to be visible and unverifiable, the watched always able to see the tower but never able to see whether or by whom they are watched, so that the one who is seen does not see; the paper's extension of the figure from surveillance to location, since the governed not only cannot verify when they are watched but cannot find the watcher at all; and Simmel's recognition that invisibility is the most radical of all the protections a power can have*

## I. The Unseen Seer

The asymmetry of visibility received its deepest modern theorisation from Michel Foucault, in his analysis of the architectural figure that has become the standard image for the modern operation of power: the panopticon, the prison Jeremy Bentham designed as a ring of backlit cells arranged around a central observation tower. The genius of the design, Foucault saw, lay in the asymmetry of sight it engineered. The prisoner in his cell is perfectly visible to the tower, lit from behind so that his every movement is exposed; but the tower is dark, and the prisoner can never see into it, can never tell whether a watcher is present, can never verify whether at any given moment he is being observed or not. Bentham had laid down the principle, Foucault noted, that power in such an arrangement should be *visible and unverifiable*: the prisoner can always see the tower, so that the fact of a watching power is constantly present to him, but he can never verify the watching, never see the watcher, never know when the gaze is upon him. The effect is that the prisoner, unable to verify when he is watched, must behave at all times as though he were — must internalise the gaze, become his own watcher, police himself on behalf of a power he cannot see. *Visibility is a trap*, in Foucault's phrase: the one who is made visible is captured, while the one who watches remains unseen. The panopticon is the asymmetry of sight built into stone — the few see the many, and the many, though they know they are seen, cannot see the few.

Foucault was chiefly concerned with the disciplinary effect of this arrangement, the way it induces the watched to police themselves, and that effect is real and important. But the figure contains a further asymmetry that bears directly on this paper's argument and that Foucault's emphasis on self-discipline tends to leave in shadow. The panoptic prisoner cannot verify *when* he is watched; the governed population, this paper contends, cannot locate *who* watches at all. The dark tower is not merely a place from which observation may or may not be occurring; it is a place whose occupant the observed can never identify, whose interior they can never map, whose very staffing is hidden from them. The asymmetry of visibility, extended from the prison to the polity, is therefore not only that the powerful

see the population while the population cannot verify the watching, but that the powerful can be seen *as a tower* — as an abstract and impersonal apparatus, "the government," "the system," "the authorities" — without ever being seen *as the particular people inside it*. The population knows there is a tower; it cannot see who is in it. And a power that can be perceived only as a tower and never as its occupants enjoys exactly the advantage the rest of this paper describes: it is present enough to compel deference and obscure enough to escape challenge, visible as an apparatus and invisible as a set of locatable, accountable, replaceable human beings.

## II. The Most Radical Protection

The sociologist Georg Simmel, writing on secrecy in 1906, identified the principle that explains why the opacity of power is so formidable a protection, and stated it in a form the paper adopts as a kind of governing maxim. Examining the secret society — any organisation that protects itself by controlling what is known about its own structure — Simmel observed that the most radical of all the protective provisions available to such a body is invisibility itself. His reasoning turned on a distinction the paper will return to repeatedly. An individual, Simmel noted, can hide only partially and temporarily: he can conceal a particular plan or condition, can absent himself from a place for a time, but his existence as such cannot be made a secret; he is, finally, a visible body in the world. A *society* — a coordinated group — can do what the individual cannot: it can conceal its very existence, so that its members may move in the most frequent and open commerce with the world while the fact that they compose a coordinated body, with shared purposes and concerted action, remains entirely hidden. The group can be invisible as a group in a way no individual can be invisible as a body, and this capacity for collective invisibility is, Simmel argued, the most radical protection a power can have, because what cannot be perceived as a coordinated entity cannot be opposed as one.

This is the precise advantage the governing network enjoys, and Simmel's analysis explains why it is so much more powerful than the mere secrecy of particular decisions. A governing class does not need to hide every decision it takes; many of its decisions are public, announced, even debated. What it needs to hide, and what the opacity protects, is its existence and operation *as a coordinated network* — the fact that the visible figures who announce the decisions are connected, through institutions and interests and informal relationships, into a structure that acts with a coherence the population does not perceive. The population sees the individual figures, each visible as a body, each apparently acting on his own account within his own institution; it does not see the network that connects them, because the network, as a coordinated entity, has availed itself of Simmel's most radical protection and made itself invisible as a network. The visible figures are the bodies that cannot hide; the network is the society that can. And the gap between the visible figures and the invisible network — between the tower one can see and the occupants one cannot — is the space in which the opacity of power operates. The next part turns from the theory of that gap to the architecture that produces it.

PART IV

# THE HUB AND THE SPOKES

*How power networks actually organise themselves to produce the opacity: the hub-and-spoke architecture, in which the centre sees the whole network while each participant sees only his own connection to the centre; why the compartmentalisation that produces this runs not only outward, against the population, but inward, against the network's own operatives, because the gravest threat to a hub is the coordination of those who serve it; and how the resulting structural uncertainty deters defection more reliably than any specific threat could*

## I. The Architecture of Concealment

The opacity of power is produced by a specific and recurring architecture, and the architecture is worth describing precisely, because it is what makes the opacity structural rather than merely a matter of particular secrets kept. Concentrated power tends to organise itself as a hub and spokes: a centre that maintains direct relationships with a set of participants, each of whom is connected to the centre but not, or only weakly, to one another. The defining property of this structure is its asymmetry of knowledge. The hub sees the whole network — knows every participant, every relationship, every resource, every plan — because every spoke runs to the hub and the hub sits where they all converge. But each participant sees only his own spoke: his own relationship to the centre, his own task, his own fragment of the operation, and not the other spokes, not the full membership, not the whole design. The centre possesses the map; the periphery possesses only its own location on a map it cannot see. This is not a metaphor but a description of how durable power networks are actually built, from the smallest to the largest, and it produces the opacity directly: the population outside the network cannot see it because it presents only its visible spokes, and even the participants inside the network cannot see it whole, because each is shown only his own connection to a centre that alone holds the full picture.

The sociologist of secrecy would recognise this immediately, and the analyst of organisations has a name for the practice that maintains it. Intelligence agencies formalise the principle as *compartmentalisation*, or the rule of need-to-know: the deliberate restriction of information to those who require it for their specific function, so that no participant holds more of the picture than his task demands. But the principle is not peculiar to intelligence agencies; it is the operating architecture of every power network that has survived long enough to face a serious challenge, whatever vocabulary it uses for it. The hub ensures that the operative who handles one domain does not know the details of the adjacent domains; that the operative who executes one kind of task does not know who else executes it; that the operative who knows the centre's plans in one area does not know its plans in another. Each participant is thereby held in a state of structured partial sight, knowing his own fragment and aware, at

most, that there are other fragments he cannot see. And this structured partial sight is what makes the network opaque not by accident but by design — opaque to the population that sees only its spokes, and opaque even to its own operatives, who see only theirs.

### II. Why the Compartmentalisation Runs Inward

The most important and least obvious feature of this architecture is that the compartmentalisation runs inward as hard as it runs outward — that the hub conceals its full structure not only from the population it governs but from its own operatives — and the reason reveals something fundamental about where the real threat to concentrated power lies. The gravest danger to a governing hub is not the challenge of a population that does not know where to direct its energy; that challenge, as the rest of the paper will show, is structurally disarmed by the opacity. The gravest danger is the *internal* one: the coordination of the hub's own operatives, the people who do know where the bodies are buried, who do have access to the network's resources, and who could, if they communicated freely with one another, assemble the collective knowledge and the collective capability to replace the hub. A small number of well-placed insiders who pooled what each of them separately knew could see the network whole, and a network seen whole by those inside it is a network whose centre can be removed by those inside it. The hub's compartmentalisation of its own operatives is therefore not paranoia and not merely a personality trait of suspicious rulers; it is structural self-preservation, the prevention of exactly the internal coordination that is the only force reliably capable of replacing a centre.

The effect of this inward compartmentalisation is a particular and powerful form of control, and it operates through uncertainty rather than through any specific threat. Because each operative knows only his own fragment, he lives in structural uncertainty about the hub's full capabilities: he knows what he can see, and he knows there is much he cannot see, and he cannot estimate the scope of what is hidden from him. This uncertainty deters defection more reliably than any specific threat could, because a specific threat can be assessed and planned against, while an unknown scope cannot. The operative contemplating defection does not know how many others there are, does not know their capabilities, does not know whether his own move would be reported to the centre before he could act, does not know what response the centre could marshal because he cannot see the centre's full hand. He is deterred not by a calculated risk but by an uncalculable one, and the uncalculability is engineered by the very compartmentalisation that keeps him from seeing the whole. The hub thus protects itself against its most dangerous adversary — its own people — by the same architecture that makes it invisible to the population, and the two concealments are one structure seen from two sides. This architecture, the paper will now show, operates identically at every scale of human power, from the smallest organisation to the largest empire.

PART V

# THE SAME ARCHITECTURE AT EVERY SCALE

*How the hub-and-spoke structure operates identically from the street corner to the empire, the scale and the formality changing while the mechanism does not: the neighbourhood organisation whose centre holds the map; the city whose visible officials front a network of interests holding no public office; the nation-state whose elected government is the face of a deeper structure that C. Wright Mills mapped as the command posts of the corporate, military, and political orders; and the empire whose subject populations see their local rulers but never the centre that holds them*

## I. From the Street Corner to the Command Posts

The architecture described in the preceding part operates identically at every scale of human power organisation, and tracing it up the scale demonstrates that the opacity is a property of how concentrated power organises rather than of any particular regime or period. At the smallest scale, the structure is visible in its rawest form. An organisation controlling a neighbourhood operates through a central figure who maintains relationships with enforcers, earners, and intermediaries; the central figure knows all the players, while the enforcers do not necessarily know one another, the earners do not know the full scope, and the residents know only that someone runs things — perhaps a name, rarely the network the name commands. The central figure's power rests on three things: the capacity for violence, the control of economic flows, and the monopoly of the map; and of the three, it is the monopoly of the map — the fact that the centre alone knows the whole network — that is most often overlooked by outside analysts and most clearly understood by the participants. At the scale of a city, the same structure operates through layers of institutional mediation: the visible figures, the mayor and the council and the commissioner, are public and at least formally accountable, but the actual decision-making network may include figures who hold no public office at all — property interests, contractors, fixers, union and media owners, individuals whose influence runs through relationships rather than positions. The population votes for the visible figures; it does not vote for, and in most cases does not know, the network. It experiences the network's outputs — the zoning decision, the contract, the pattern of enforcement — without seeing the process that produced them.

At the scale of the nation-state, the architecture acquires the institutional formality that makes it at once more powerful and harder to identify, and here the paper draws on the classic empirical mapping of it. The visible government — the elected officials, the appointed administrators, the public agencies — is the face the population sees; behind and around it operates a network that includes corporate

leadership, financial institutions, military commands, intelligence services, media ownership, and the elite social formations whose membership overlaps with all of these. C. Wright Mills, in his study of the American power structure at mid-century, mapped this directly, identifying the interlocking leadership of the corporate, military, and political orders who occupied what he called the command posts, and whose shared formation — the common schools, the overlapping directorships, the intermarriage, the clubs — produced a coordinated action that the population attributed instead to the open processes of democratic competition. Mills's most useful observation for this paper concerned the levels of power. The public, he argued, attends to the *middle* levels — the visible contest of parties and legislators and organised interests, the semi-organised stalemate that fills the newspapers — and mistakes this visible middle for the whole of power; but the middle levels neither express the real will of the bottom nor determine the real decisions of the top, which are taken at a higher and far less visible level that the public's attention to the middle conveniently obscures. The visible contest is real, but it is not where the largest decisions are made, and its very visibility draws the eye away from the level that is.

## II. The Imperial Scale

At the scale of empire, the architecture becomes geopolitical, and the opacity acquires an additional layer, because now there are whole populations who cannot see even the local hub that governs them, let alone the imperial centre that governs the hub. The governing centre of an empire maintains relationships with client states, subordinate administrations, and local elites across vast territories, and the population in each territory sees its own local rulers — the visible authorities who tax and police and administer it. What it does not see is the imperial centre's relationship with those local rulers: the subsidies that sustain them, the intelligence sharing that informs them, the diplomatic pressure that directs them, the implicit or explicit threat that keeps them in place. The local population experiences its local ruler as the source of its conditions, and cannot see that the local ruler is himself a spoke running to a hub in a distant capital, dependent on a centre the population has no way to perceive. And the population of the imperial centre itself may see no more of the full network than the subject populations do — may not see the covert interventions, the intelligence operations, the financial arrangements that maintain the empire's reach, may believe its state to be merely a national government when it is in fact the hub of a structure that spans continents.

The lesson of scaling the architecture is that the opacity of power is not a feature of any particular kind of regime — not of autocracy as against democracy, not of empire as against republic, not of the criminal organisation as against the legitimate state. It is a feature of concentrated power as such, reproducing itself wherever power concentrates, because the same structural incentives produce the same architecture at every scale. The hub sees the network; the spokes see their own connection to the hub; the population sees neither. The vocabulary changes from the street to the capital to the empire, and the formality and the stakes change with it, but the architecture does not, and the asymmetry of visibility it produces is the constant. This is why the paper treats the opacity of power as a structural dimension rather than as the property of particular wicked regimes: it is found wherever the structure is found, which is wherever power has concentrated and survived. With the architecture established at every scale, the paper can now state the asymmetry it produces with full precision.

PART VI

# THE ASYMMETRY STATED PRECISELY

*The core of the argument, stated exactly and followed to its consequences: that the network knows the population while the population does not know the network, and that this single asymmetry of visibility produces the most consequential disabilities of the governed — their inability to aim a challenge, their misattribution of deliberate decisions to impersonal forces, and their fighting of an opponent that can see them while they cannot see it; the grounding of the phrase "that is just the way things are" in the sociology of the taken-for-granted; and the gap between how power is discussed in the rooms where it is exercised and how it is discussed in public*

## I. The Network Sees; the Population Does Not

The asymmetry can now be stated with the precision the argument requires. The governing network knows the governed population: its composition, its resources, its organisational formations, its leaders, its fault lines, its vulnerabilities — and, where it wishes, the names and movements of those who would organise against it. The governed population does not know the governing network: not its composition, not its internal structure, not its real decision-making process, not its actual membership, and in many cases not even its existence as a coordinated entity rather than as the impersonal background of "the system." The network sees the population. The population does not see the network. This is the asymmetry, stated bare, and its consequences are the disabilities under which every popular challenge to concentrated power labours. A population that does not know who governs it cannot direct a challenge effectively: it may pour its energy into visible figures who are not the centre of gravity; it may succeed in removing a visible figure and discover that nothing structural changes, because the network that produced the figure simply produces another; it may, lacking any map of the actual decision-makers, attribute the outcomes it suffers to impersonal forces — the market, the system, the way things work — that are in fact the products of specific decisions by specific people whose identities it has never been permitted to learn.

That last consequence is the hinge between this paper and the collection's larger argument, and it deserves to be named exactly. The language of structural inevitability — the phrase *that is just the way things are* — is itself a product of the opacity. Things are the way they are because specific people made specific decisions; but the opacity of the decision-making process makes the decisions appear as conditions rather than as choices, and a condition does not provoke the response that a choice provokes. One can be angry at a choice, argue with it, demand that it be made differently, hold its maker to account; a condition is merely endured, like the weather. The sociology of knowledge has a term for the region of social life that is experienced in this way, as the unquestioned and self-evident

background that goes without saying because it comes without saying — the *doxa*, in Pierre Bourdieu's vocabulary, the taken-for-granted order that is misrecognised as natural rather than recognised as arranged. The opacity of power is the engine that manufactures doxa out of decision: by hiding the makers and the making, it converts what was chosen into what is simply given, and so moves the arrangement out of the field of things the population might contest and into the field of things it must simply inhabit. The misattribution of deliberate decisions to impersonal forces is not a failure of the population's intelligence. It is the predictable cognitive result of an engineered absence of information about who actually decides.

### II. Fighting in the Dark

The asymmetry also explains why the governing network's response to a challenge is so much more effective than the challenge itself, and the explanation turns on the same differential visibility. The network knows who the challengers are — their leaders, their organisational structure, their resources, their plans — because knowing the population is precisely what the network does. The challengers do not know who, specifically, they are challenging: they may know a public name, but they do not know the network behind it, cannot map its structure, cannot identify its nodes. The result is a contest in which one side can see the other clearly and the other is fighting in the dark. The network can target the challenge's organisational nodes with precision, because it can identify them; the challenge cannot target the network's nodes, because it cannot find them. This asymmetry of visibility is, in many cases, more decisive than the asymmetry of force that the monopoly of violence provides, because a challenge that could see its opponent's structure could in principle find and exploit its vulnerabilities, while a challenge that cannot see the structure is reduced to striking at shadows and at the visible figures who may be the least essential parts of it. The deepest disadvantage of the governed is not that they are outgunned. It is that they are fighting an opponent they cannot see, while that opponent sees them in full.

There is a final consequence of the asymmetry that exposes the gap at its starkest, and it concerns the difference between how power is discussed in the rooms where it is exercised and how it is discussed in public. The anthropologist James Scott distinguished, in his study of domination, between the *public transcript* — the open, performed interaction between the powerful and the subordinate, scripted largely by the powerful — and the *hidden transcript* — what each group says offstage, out of the other's hearing. The governing class, like every dominant group, has its hidden transcript: the candid talk among its own members, in the rooms where power is actually exercised, in which the structure of power is discussed with a matter-of-factness that the public discourse prohibits. Among themselves, those who hold power often speak plainly about how it works — who decides what, whose interests a given arrangement serves, where the real leverage lies. To everyone else they speak in the euphemisms of the public transcript, in which the same arrangements are described as the impersonal workings of the system, the necessities of the situation, the way things must be. The gap between the two transcripts — between the plain private account and the euphemistic public one — is itself an expression of the opacity, and a population that could hear the private conversation would recognise at once that the public account and the private account describe different worlds. But it cannot hear the private conversation. That is the point. The paper now turns to the mechanisms by which the gap is actively maintained.

PART VII

# HOW THE OPACITY IS MAINTAINED

*That the opacity is not self-sustaining but actively engineered, because the population has every incentive to discover who governs it and the network's own operatives have every incentive to coordinate; the identifiable mechanisms of maintenance — the institutional façade that absorbs the population's attention onto visible structures, the rotation of visible figures that simulates change while the network persists, and the delegitimation of inquiry that makes the most important political question the most socially costly to ask*

## I. The Institutional Façade and the Rotation of Figures

The opacity of power is not self-maintaining. The governed population has a natural and powerful incentive to discover who actually governs it, and the network's own operatives have a natural incentive to communicate with one another in ways that would erode the compartmentalisation; left to themselves, both incentives would degrade the opacity over time. The governing class must therefore invest continuously in maintaining it, and the mechanisms it uses are identifiable. The most effective is the institutional façade — the construction and maintenance of visible institutional structures that the population takes to be the actual locus of power and at which it directs its political energy. Elections, parliamentary debates, public hearings, press conferences, judicial proceedings: these are the visible face of governance, and the population votes, petitions, follows, and argues within them, investing its agency in the structures it can see. The visible structures may perform genuine functions; the façade need not be a hollow fraud. But they may also absorb the population's attention and energy while the consequential decisions are taken in spaces the visible structures do not represent — and the result, whether the façade is hollow or merely partial, is that the population believes it knows where power resides when it does not. This is Clapmar's *simulacrum* in modern dress, and it is Mills's visible middle level performing its function: the preserved appearance of a constitution at which the population's attention is fixed, while the substance operates at a level the appearance conceals.

The rotation of visible figures is the façade's temporal counterpart, and it manufactures the appearance of accountability as the façade manufactures the appearance of locatable power. The visible figures are periodically replaced — through elections, appointments, reshuffles — and the replacement creates the impression of change and of answerability: the president has changed, the cabinet has changed, the party in power has changed, and the population concludes that power has changed hands. But if the underlying network — the financial interests, the institutional relationships, the social formation that produces the governing personnel — persists across the transition, then the change is in the occupants of the visible offices and not in the structure that those offices front, and the population

has observed a rotation of faces within a persistent network. The visibility of the rotation is itself a form of opacity: it fixes the population's attention on what changed, the faces, and directs it away from what did not, the structure. A population that watches the faces rotate and concludes that power is therefore accountable has been shown exactly what it was meant to see, and kept from seeing exactly what it was meant to miss.

### II. The Delegitimation of Inquiry

The most insidious of the maintenance mechanisms is the one that operates directly on the question this paper exists to ask, by making the question itself costly to raise. The governing class, and the broader culture that forms around it, actively delegitimises inquiry into the actual structure of power: the question of who really governs, as distinct from who visibly governs, is categorised as conspiracy theory, paranoia, or unsophisticated thinking, and the categorisation makes the question socially expensive to ask. An individual who asks who actually made a particular decision, who benefits from a particular policy, whose interests a particular arrangement serves, risks being filed among those who believe in shadowy cabals and secret plots — and the social penalty, the small loss of standing that attends being thought unserious, discourages the inquiry far more efficiently than any direct prohibition could. The result is a remarkable inversion: the most consequential question that can be asked about any political arrangement — *who actually holds power?* — becomes the question that carries the highest social cost to ask in public, so that the inquiry most necessary to a free people is the one its own culture has been arranged to discourage. The delegitimation is the opacity's immune system, attacking the very curiosity that would erode it.

The irony, and the proof that the delegitimation is a mechanism rather than a sound epistemic principle, is that the governing class's own members do not labour under it. Among themselves, in the hidden transcript, they discuss the actual structure of power with exactly the matter-of-factness that the public discourse forbids; the question of who really decides is, in the rooms where the deciding happens, not paranoid but routine, the ordinary content of professional conversation. The delegitimation of the question applies only to the governed — only to those for whom an answer would be most useful and most dangerous to the arrangement. And the conflation it depends on, the equation of structural inquiry with conspiracy theory, is not an accident but the most important single mechanism protecting the opacity, because it ensures that the structural question — *how is power organised?* — is treated as identical to the paranoid question — *who is secretly plotting?* — and dismissed along with it. The two questions are not the same, and the distinction between them is so central to the paper's argument, and so frequently used against it, that it requires a part of its own.

PART VIII

# WHY THIS IS NOT CONSPIRACY THEORY

*The decisive distinction, since the analysis is most easily disarmed by being mistaken for the thing it is not: that conspiracy theory posits a small group of knowing plotters who designed and control events from a single hidden centre, while the structural account posits a pattern of organisation that emerges wherever power concentrates, not by design but by competitive selection; Karl Popper's diagnosis of the conspiracy theory of society as the error of explaining all outcomes by deliberate intention while ignoring the unintended consequences of action; and why the structural reading, not the conspiratorial one, is both truer and more durable*

## I. Pattern, Not Plot

The analysis presented here will inevitably be read by some as a conspiracy theory — the claim that a secret group of plotters controls events from behind a curtain — and it is necessary to distinguish the structural account sharply from that claim, because the distinction is analytically decisive and the confusion between the two is itself, as the previous part showed, a mechanism that protects the opacity. Conspiracy theory, properly speaking, posits a specific group of knowing conspirators who have designed the system from a central location and who control its outcomes according to their plan; pull back the curtain, name the plotters, and the simple truth stands revealed. The structural account posits something quite different and considerably more durable: a *pattern* of network organisation that emerges wherever power concentrates, not because anyone designed it from a master plan but because the structural incentives of concentrated power produce the same architecture again and again. The hub-and-spoke structure, the inward compartmentalisation, the opacity toward the population — these are not the products of a single coordinating intelligence. They are the products of competitive selection: networks that organise this way survive and reproduce, while networks that do not are penetrated, coordinated against, and replaced by networks that do. No one need have designed the opacity for the opacity to be everywhere, any more than anyone need have designed the similar shapes of unrelated predators for those shapes to recur; the shape recurs because it works, and the ones that have it are the ones still standing.

The philosopher Karl Popper gave this distinction its classic statement when he diagnosed what he called the *conspiracy theory of society* — the mistaken view that all significant social outcomes are the intended results of the deliberate design of powerful people, so that to explain any phenomenon one need only identify who planned and conspired to bring it about. Popper's objection was not that conspiracies never occur; he granted that they do. His objection was that they rarely succeed as intended, because social life is dense with unintended consequences — nothing, as he put it, ever quite comes off as planned — so that the proper task of social science is not to hunt for the hidden designers

of outcomes but to explain the unintended consequences of intentional action, the structures and results that no one chose and that emerge from the interaction of many choosers. This is precisely the structural account's relation to the opacity of power. The opacity is real, and it is maintained by intentional actions — the compartmentalisation is deliberate, the façade is built, the inquiry is delegitimised — but the overall architecture is not the executed design of a master plan; it is the emergent and selected result of countless actors, each pursuing the ordinary logic of holding and protecting a position, converging on the same structure because the structure is what survives. The opacity is intended in its parts and emergent in its whole, which is exactly the kind of phenomenon Popper said social science exists to explain.

### II. Why the Distinction Decides the Response

The distinction is not merely a matter of intellectual hygiene; it determines what kind of response to the opacity could possibly work, and getting it wrong wastes the response on the wrong target. If the problem were a conspiracy — a specific group of plotters at a hidden centre — then the appropriate response would be exposure: find the conspirators, name them, dismantle their plot, and the problem is solved. But if the problem is structural, the exposure of specific individuals changes nothing fundamental, because the structure produces new occupants for the same positions, new hubs for the same network, new faces for the same façade. Naming the people in the tower does not empty the tower; the architecture that put them there puts others there in their place. The response to a structural problem must therefore itself be structural: a change in the architecture — in the rules that govern transparency, in the institutions that distribute information about power, in the mechanisms through which the population can actually observe how decisions are made and by whom. This is why the conflation of structural analysis with conspiracy theory does the opacity such service. By treating the structural question as if it were the paranoid one, the conflation ensures that the serious inquiry is dismissed along with the unserious, leaving the field to precisely the conspiratorial thinking it claims to oppose — for when the responsible structural question is forbidden, the irresponsible conspiratorial answer is the only one left to fill the vacuum. The honest position holds the two firmly apart: conspiracies occur and should be exposed where they do; but the opacity of power is not a conspiracy, it is a structure, and the structure is the more important and the more durable subject, because it is what produces the conditions in which both legitimate power and occasional genuine conspiracy operate. Seeing the structure clearly is the prerequisite for not mistaking it for a plot — and for not mistaking the exposure of a plot for the solution to a structure.

PART IX

# THE SMALLNESS, AND THE MYSTIQUE OF SCALE

*One of the most consequential facts the opacity protects: how few people actually occupy the governing centre of any network, and why the population's inability to see the smallness sustains the mystique on which deference depends; Gaetano Mosca's observation that an organised minority always rules an unorganised majority by virtue of its coordination rather than its numbers; and how the deliberate appearance of vast scale and impersonal complexity converts a set of locatable human choices into the semblance of an apparatus too large to challenge*

## I. The Organised Minority

Among the most consequential facts that the opacity of power protects is how few people actually occupy the governing centre of any given network. The population, numbering in the thousands or millions or billions according to the scale of the arrangement, naturally assumes that the governing apparatus is proportionally large — that so many must be ruled by many. They are not. The actual decision-making centre, the group whose choices set the direction of the network's operations, is in virtually every documented case strikingly small, small enough in many cases to gather in a single room. The political theorist Gaetano Mosca built his account of politics around exactly this observation: in every society, he argued, an organised minority rules an unorganised majority, and the minority's advantage is not numerical but organisational. A small group that can coordinate in real time — that shares information freely among its members, that can make and implement decisions without the immense transaction costs of mass deliberation — will consistently prevail over a far larger group that cannot coordinate, however much the larger group outweighs it in numbers and in muscle. The smallness of the governing centre is not a weakness to be concealed for shame; it is the very source of the coordination advantage that lets the few govern the many. But it is also a vulnerability, which is precisely why the opacity exists to hide it.

The vulnerability is this: if the governed population genuinely grasped how few people actually make the decisions that shape its conditions of life, the mystique of governance would be difficult to sustain. The population defers to what it perceives as a vast, complex, impersonal apparatus — "the government," "the system," "the establishment," "the markets" — and these abstractions do indispensable work, because they suggest an entity so large, so distributed, so deeply woven into the structure of reality that to challenge it would be like challenging the weather. The opacity sustains this perception by hiding the smallness behind the appearance of scale. For if the population could see that

the actual centre consists of a number of people who could fit around a table, the decisions that issue from it would look like what they are: choices made by specific, locatable, replaceable individuals who could, in principle, have chosen otherwise. And the language of inevitability — the sense that the arrangement is simply how things are, beyond anyone's choosing — would collapse, because one cannot long believe that an outcome is an impersonal necessity once one can see the small group of people who decided it.

## II. The Manufacture of Apparent Scale

This is why governing classes invest so heavily in the appearance of scale and complexity, and the investment is one of the opacity's most important and least noticed expenditures. The bureaucratic apparatus, the regulatory infrastructure, the institutional façade, the sheer proliferation of offices and procedures and acronyms — these perform genuine administrative functions, but they perform an opacity function as well, creating the impression that governance is a process too vast, too distributed, too technically demanding for any ordinary person to comprehend, let alone to challenge. The impression is not wholly false; modern governance is genuinely complex, and the complexity is real. But the complexity is also invoked, and often manufactured, precisely to obscure the simplicity of the decisions the complexity serves — which are, beneath the procedural intricacy, the oldest and simplest decisions there are: who gets what, who pays for it, and whose interests are advanced at whose expense. The mystique of scale converts these simple distributive choices into the semblance of an impersonal machine grinding out necessary outcomes, and the conversion is exactly the move the collection's companion study describes as mistaking the made for the given. The smallness, made visible, would expose the choices as choices; the apparent vastness, maintained, presents them as conditions. And so the opacity hides not only who decides but how few they are, because the fewness, once seen, is the most direct refutation of the inevitability on which the whole arrangement leans.

PART X

# THE OPACITY AND THE THEORY OF REVOLUTION

*The most consequential implication of the analysis, and the bridge to the collection's account of why radical seizures reproduce the orders they overthrow: that the popular theory of revolution assumes the population knows what it is removing, when in fact it can see only the visible façade and not the network behind it; the historical record of revolutions that removed the visible figures while the governing architecture reproduced itself with new occupants; and why this is not a counsel of despair but a redirection of effort from the face of power to its structure*

## I. Removing the Façade

The opacity of power has a specific and sobering implication for the popular theory of revolution — the belief that a sufficiently mobilised population can simply remove the governing class and replace it with governance that serves the population's interests — and drawing the implication out connects this paper directly to the collection's account of why radical seizures so reliably reproduce the orders they set out to destroy. The popular theory assumes that the population knows what it is removing. The analysis of this paper shows that it does not. The population sees the institutional façade — the visible government, the public officials, the symbols of authority — and it can indeed remove these visible elements; revolutions are entirely capable of toppling kings, dissolving parliaments, and executing ministers. But the population cannot remove the network, because it cannot see the network; it cannot dismantle a structure whose contours it has never been permitted to learn; it cannot replace players whose identities it has never been told. It can, at most, clear the stage of the visible actors and wait to see who walks on next. The revolution removes the face of power. The structure behind the face — the network architecture, the compartmentalisation, the asymmetry of visibility, the monopoly of the map — survives, because it was never visible enough to be targeted in the first place.

The historical record confirms this with an uncomfortable consistency, and two of the largest cases make the pattern plain. The French Revolution removed the visible monarchy and the visible aristocracy; but the network of administrative expertise, financial interest, and social connection that constituted the actual governing infrastructure was not visible in the same way and was not removed, and Napoleon's apparatus drew on much the same administrative class that had served the crown. The Russian Revolution removed the Tsar and the visible aristocratic order; but the governing network that emerged under the new regime drew on the same structural incentives, produced the same hub-and-spoke architecture, and within a single generation had recreated the same opacity toward the population it governed that the old order had maintained. In each case the population replaced the

visible figures, and in each case the network architecture reproduced itself with new occupants. This is not, or not chiefly, because the revolutions were betrayed by cynical leaders, though betrayal occurs; it is because the opacity of power means that the population's revolutionary energy is necessarily directed at what it can see rather than at what it cannot, so that it destroys the façade and leaves the architecture standing, and discovers afterward that the world has changed less than it expected because the structure it thought it was destroying was not the structure that actually produced the old world. It was destroying the face. The architecture was behind it, and the architecture was never on the stage.

### II. Not Despair, but Redirection

This implication is easily mistaken for a counsel of despair — if the network survives every revolution, why act at all? — and the paper is careful to reject that reading, because the analysis does not show that the structure cannot be changed but only that it cannot be changed by the method the popular theory assumes. The structure is not eternal and not invulnerable; it is, as the whole paper has argued, a made thing, produced by identifiable mechanisms that can be identified and degraded. What the analysis shows is that the energy spent removing visible figures is, by itself, spent on the wrong target — that clearing the stage changes the cast and not the play, because the play is written by the architecture and not by the actors. The redirection the analysis recommends is therefore from the face of power to its structure: from the project of removing the visible occupants of the tower to the slower and less dramatic project of changing the architecture that produces them — the rules of visibility, the institutions that distribute knowledge about power, the mechanisms through which the population can actually observe who decides and how. This is the collection's standing distinction between the act and the posture restated in the register of visibility: the act of removing a ruler releases the pressure of a moment and reproduces the structure; the posture of making the structure visible is the patient, unending work that alone can change what the structure produces. The revolution that aims at the face is aiming, however justly, in the dark. The work that aims at the architecture must begin by turning on the light, which is the subject of the paper's final part.

PART XI

# MAKING IT VISIBLE

*What follows from the analysis: that the opacity, being structural, cannot be abolished by naming individuals but can be degraded by reducing the gap between what the population can see and what exists; the mechanisms of that degradation — transparency, institutional pluralism, and independent investigative capacity — and the old normative tradition, from Bentham and Kant, that holds publicity to be the precondition of accountable power; the contemporary frontier of the asymmetry in the one-way mirror of the surveillance economy; and the verdict, that the most important question a people can ask is who actually holds power, and that the task of serious analysis is to make the answer visible*

## I. Degrading the Opacity

The analysis does not lend itself to easy prescription, because the opacity of power is a structural feature of how concentrated power organises itself, and structural features are not abolished by being named. But understanding the opacity changes what kinds of political effort are likely to be productive, and it points to a class of interventions that, while they cannot eliminate the opacity, can degrade it — can reduce the gap between what the population can see and what actually exists, and every reduction in that gap makes the governing network slightly more visible, slightly more accountable, and slightly less able to present its choices as impersonal conditions rather than as the deliberate decisions they are. Three kinds of intervention do this work. *Transparency mechanisms* — the mandatory disclosure of financial interests, the public recording of institutional decisions, the open data that maps the relationships between economic power and political outcome — directly narrow the gap by forcing into view what the opacity would keep hidden. *Institutional pluralism* — the distribution of governing functions across multiple independent bodies with overlapping jurisdictions and competing interests, rather than their concentration in a single structure — makes the hub-and-spoke architecture harder to maintain, because when many institutions must coordinate visibly, the informal network behind the façade is more exposed than when a single structure absorbs all functions. And *independent investigative capacity* — journalism, academic research, legal inquiry, community documentation — creates information about the structure of power that the network does not control, every investigation that maps an actual decision-making relationship adding to the population's incomplete but growing picture of the network that governs it. None of these abolishes the opacity. All of them degrade it, and the degrading is the achievable work.

This is not a new insight, and the paper grounds it in an old normative tradition that understood the connection between visibility and accountable power long before the present analysis. The principle that publicity is the precondition of accountability — that power exercised in the open is constrained as

power exercised in secret is not — was stated with particular force by Jeremy Bentham, who held that publicity is the very soul of justice, the surest guard against improbity, because the official who knows his conduct is visible to those it affects is kept, by that visibility alone, closer to honest dealing than any rule could keep him. It was given a deeper philosophical form by Immanuel Kant, whose principle of publicity proposed a test for the justice of any exercise of power: an action whose governing maxim cannot be made public without defeating its own purpose is, by that very fact, unjust, because it depends on the concealment of its own principle from those subject to it. The opacity of power is the standing violation of this principle — the systematic concealment, from those subject to power, of the principle on which the power actually operates — and the remedy the tradition prescribes is the one this paper has reached by its own route: publicity, the making-visible, the narrowing of the gap between the public account of power and the private one. The task is not to abolish an ineradicable structure but to subject it, continuously and imperfectly, to the light that constrains it.

### II. The One-Way Mirror, and the Verdict

The asymmetry this paper describes is not a relic of older regimes; it has found, in the present, a new and intensifying frontier, and naming it locates the analysis in the world its readers inhabit. The surveillance economy has reproduced the opacity of power in a pure and technologically amplified form, and its analysts have named the structure in terms that could serve as a summary of this whole paper. The scholar of surveillance capitalism describes its central social relation as a *one-way mirror*: the firms that operate it, she writes, "know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us" — they see the population in a detail no prior power achieved, while rendering themselves, their methods, and their purposes opaque to the population they see. This is the asymmetry of visibility — the network sees the population, the population does not see the network — reborn in the architecture of the digital age, and its analysts have correctly identified it as a threat to self-government, because a population rendered transparent to a power that remains opaque to it has lost the precondition of holding that power to account. The one-way mirror is the panopticon's tower rebuilt in data: the watched fully lit, the watcher fully dark, and the asymmetry between them — the oldest structure this paper has traced, running from the arcana imperii to the present — now operating at a scale and a granularity the Roman theorists of the secrets of empire could not have imagined.

The verdict of the paper can therefore be stated plainly. The governing class's greatest structural advantage is not its monopoly of force, formidable as that is; nor its control of information about the world, real as that is; nor its administrative expertise, genuine as that is. Its greatest advantage is that the population does not know who it is — does not know the network's composition, its coordination, its decisions, or how few of its members there are. The standard account of the information asymmetry that sustains domination, that elites control what the population knows about the world, is correct but incomplete; the deeper asymmetry is that elites control what the population knows about *them*. It is not, in the end, what they know. It is what you do not know about them. And the gap between the two is the architecture of durable power. The most important question any governed population can ask is therefore the simplest and the most discouraged: *who actually holds power?* It is not paranoid, and it is not unsophisticated; it is the prerequisite of every other form of political engagement, because without an answer to it every challenge is aimed in the dark. The opacity is real, it is engineered, and it is maintained by mechanisms that can be identified and, with effort, degraded. The task of serious political analysis is to refuse the conflation of that question with conspiracy, to hold the structure apart

from the plot, and to do the unending work the question demands — which is, simply, to make power visible. Tested, not revealed: the governing class's greatest advantage is not what it knows about the world, but what the population does not know about the governing class, and the work of a free people is to keep narrowing, in every generation, the distance between the two.

## A NOTE ON SOURCES

This paper grounds an internal concept in the literature on power, secrecy, and visibility; every figure and quotation has been verified to a primary or authoritative source, and quotations are kept short.

The historical pedigree follows the Roman doctrine of the *arcana imperii* as used by Tacitus (*Histories* and *Annals*) and its early-modern systematisation in the reason-of-state tradition, in particular Arnold Clapmar's *De Arcanis Rerum Publicarum* (1605) and his category of the *simulacra*. The theorisation of the asymmetry of visibility follows Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), on the panopticon and the principle that power be "visible and unverifiable," and Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* (1906), on invisibility as the most radical protection.

The map of power draws on Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (1974), for the three dimensions the paper argues are preceded by a fourth; Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (1896), on the organised minority; C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956), on the command posts and the visible middle levels of power; and the empirical tradition of network-mapping (Domhoff and others). The account of the taken-for-granted draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *doxa* and misrecognition; the gap between candid and public talk of power draws on James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), and his account of legibility in *Seeing Like a State* (1998).

The distinction between structural pattern and designed plot follows Karl Popper's critique of "the conspiracy theory of society" in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963). The normative tradition of publicity follows Jeremy Bentham (publicity as the soul of justice) and Immanuel Kant (the principle of publicity). The contemporary frontier follows Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), on the "one-way mirror" and the asymmetry of knowledge, and Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society* (2015). The paper also builds on the collection's own companion studies of belief, formation, and the inheritance of made arrangements.

No verdict rests on the strongest form of any disputed claim, and the conditions under which the central claim would fail are stated in the text. *Part of the collection* Patterns of Power. *Tested, not revealed.*